To what extent do historians attribute the motives of Roman persecution of prominent Christians (e.g. Church Fathers and apologists, etc.) during the second and third centuries up to the Edict of Milan to eliminating any threat because of their ecclesiastical influence, rather than they representing an illegal religion? (Use only academic sources and avoid Wikipedia, Reddit and other opinion platforms).

I have gathered substantial academic research on Roman persecution motives. Let me compile a comprehensive scholarly response.

Roman Persecution of Christians: Scholarly Debate on Motives

Modern historians debate the extent to which Roman persecution of prominent Christians during the second and third centuries was motivated by their ecclesiastical influence and organizational threat versus their status as practitioners of an illegal religion. The scholarly consensus reveals a complex, evolving relationship between these factors rather than a simple either-or explanation.

The Legal Framework Debate

G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's influential 1963 study established a foundational argument that Christians were persecuted primarily for "the name itself" (*nomen ipsum*)—simply for being Christian—rather than for specific crimes. Ste. Croix countered A.N. Sherwin-White's theory that Christians faced prosecution due to their obstinacy, insisting instead that the designation "Christian" alone was sufficient grounds for persecution unless the accused could clear themselves through prescribed procedures.[1]

However, this "illegal religion" (*religio illicita*) framework has been complicated by scholarly analysis. The correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Emperor Trajan (c. 110 CE) demonstrates that no empire-wide law explicitly criminalizing Christianity existed at that time. Trajan's response to Pliny established that Christians should not be actively sought out, but if accused and convicted of refusing to sacrifice to Roman gods, they were to be punished. This created a legal ambiguity where Christianity occupied a precarious position—not formally proscribed by universal statute, yet vulnerable to prosecution based on governors' discretionary powers (*coercitio*).[2] [3] [4] [5]

Evolution of Persecution: From Sporadic to Systematic

Scholarly consensus recognizes three distinct phases of persecution:[6] [7]

Phase One (First-Second Century): Persecution was sporadic, local, and dependent on provincial circumstances. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix and W.H.C. Frend agreed that during this period, persecution stemmed primarily from popular hostility and local officials responding to accusations, not centralized imperial policy. The charge was typically refusal to participate in civic religious rites, which Romans viewed as essential to maintaining the *pax deorum* (peace with the gods) and social order.[7] [8] [2] [6]

Phase Two (Mid-Third Century): The Decian persecution (249-251 CE) marked a fundamental shift. Emperor Decius issued the first empire-wide edict requiring all citizens to sacrifice to Roman gods and obtain certificates (*libelli*) proving compliance. Scholars debate Decius's primary motivation. While some historians initially proposed economic factors, most modern scholars emphasize religious-political concerns: Decius attributed Rome's military and economic crises to neglect of traditional religion and sought to restore unity through universal participation in state cult.[9] [10] [11]

Phase Three (Valerian 257-260 CE): The Valerian persecution represents the clearest evidence that ecclesiastical organization itself became a target. Christopher J. Haas's authoritative 1983 study in *Church History* demonstrates that Valerian's edicts specifically targeted Christian institutional structures.[12] [13] [14]

Valerian's Persecution: Targeting Ecclesiastical Power

The Valerian persecution provides the most compelling evidence for historians attributing persecution to concerns about ecclesiastical influence. Valerian's approach was markedly different from Decius's universal mandate. His first edict (257 CE) ordered all Christian clergy—bishops, presbyters, and deacons—to sacrifice to Roman gods or face exile, prohibited Christian worship assemblies, and closed cemeteries. The second edict (258 CE) dramatically escalated measures by targeting Christian elites and institutional assets.[15] [16] [17] [18]

Cyprian of Carthage's letter (Epistle 80) preserved the details: senators, knights (*equites*), and other persons of rank who remained Christian would lose their property and status; persistent refusal meant execution. Christian matrons would be stripped of property and exiled. Members of the imperial household would lose their property, be placed in chains, and enslaved on imperial estates.[18] [12]

Key Scholarly Interpretations:

Christopher Haas argues convincingly that Valerian's persecution was fundamentally religious in motivation, though encompassing related social aims. Unlike Decius's attempt at universal compliance, Valerian specifically targeted Christian leadership and institutional infrastructure. The confiscation of church property, prohibition of cemetery access (disrupting Christian burial practices and martyr veneration), and elimination of clergy aimed to decapitate the organizational structure.[16] [17] [13] [18] [12]

The targeting of wealthy Christian aristocrats and matrons reveals recognition that Christianity had gained alarming momentum among the elite, threatening traditional Roman social hierarchies. Valerian's strategy sought to sever the Christian masses from the patronage networks sustaining their charitable operations—a distinctive feature of Christian community organization that attracted converts and built institutional capacity.[17] [19] [18]

Political Threat Versus Religious Deviance: A False Dichotomy

Modern scholarship increasingly rejects simplistic either-or explanations. As several historians note, religion and politics were inseparable in Roman society. The refusal to participate in civic religious ceremonies was simultaneously a religious offense and a political act of disloyalty.[20] [4] [21] [22] [2] [6]

The Roman state religion functioned as "a pillar of the Roman state," and any perceived threat to that religion endangered state stability. Emperor worship served as a test of political loyalty, not merely religious conformity. Christians' refusal to sacrifice was interpreted as both impiety (*superstitio*) threatening divine favor and potential sedition against imperial authority.[4] [23] [22] [2] [15] [20]

Organizational Structure as Threat

By the mid-third century, Christianity had developed sophisticated organizational structures—episcopal hierarchy, property holdings, welfare networks, and communication systems spanning the empire. Eusebius and Cyprian's correspondence reveals an international ecclesiastical network capable of coordinating responses to persecution.[24] [25] [26] [15] [17] [18]

This organizational capacity increasingly concerned Roman authorities. The Valerian persecution's surgical targeting of bishops and clergy, confiscation of church property, and prohibition of assemblies demonstrates imperial recognition that Christianity's institutional strength, not merely individual belief, posed a challenge to Roman order.[16] [17] [18] [12]

W.H.C. Frend emphasized that persecution reflected "the ceaseless nagging" of various antagonists—Jews, pagans, and authorities—all responding to Christianity's growing institutional presence and social influence. The Great Persecution under Diocletian (303-313 CE) represented the culmination of this concern, with edicts specifically ordering destruction of churches, burning of scriptures, and imprisonment of clergy—systematic attacks on institutional Christianity.[27] [28] [29] [30] [7]

Scholarly Consensus and Continuing Debate

Most historians acknowledge that Roman persecution motives were multifaceted and evolved over time. During the first two centuries, persecution primarily targeted Christians for religious deviance from civic norms. However, as Christianity developed robust organizational structures and attracted elite converts, Roman authorities increasingly perceived it as a political-social threat requiring institutional suppression.[2] [6] [7] [17] [18] [12] [16]

The work of scholars like G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, W.H.C. Frend, Christopher Haas, Robin Lane Fox, and more recently Candida Moss (whose revisionist thesis has generated significant scholarly response) demonstrates ongoing refinement of understanding. While debate continues about

the extent and continuity of persecution, there is substantial scholarly agreement that by the mid-third century—particularly under Valerian—Roman authorities explicitly targeted Christian ecclesiastical structures and leadership, recognizing that organizational capacity, not merely religious belief, represented a challenge to imperial order.[8] [31] [32] [13] [17] [18] [12] [16]

The evidence suggests that historians attribute significant weight to ecclesiastical influence as a motive for persecution, particularly during the systematic campaigns of the third century. However, this was inseparable from Christianity's status as an unauthorized *superstitio* and its members' refusal to participate in civic religion—factors that together constituted both religious deviance and political threat in the Roman worldview where religion and state were fundamentally intertwined.[22] [6] [12] [2]

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